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## **Why aspiring migrants trust migration brokers:**

### **The moral economy of departure in Anglophone Cameroon**

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#### **Abstract:**

In the face of restrictive migration policies, migration brokers in emigration countries sell services that are meant to facilitate departure projects. Not all aspiring migrants that give money to migration brokers are able to travel. The article asks how aspiring migrants in Anglophone Cameroon understand and deal with the potential of deceit by migration brokers. The analysis is based on 16 months of fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2013, predominantly in the town of Buea. By studying the social effects of European migration management through the lens of norms and values in a place of departure, the article argues that migration brokers cannot be understood exclusively as actors that are instrumental for the realization of migration trajectories. In a context where European migration management frustrates aspirations for global citizenship, migration brokers are also dealers in hopes for global belonging. Relations of trust between brokers and aspiring migrants are articulated through the local terms, such as dokimen, feymen and big men. The article's two case studies examine relations between migration brokers and aspiring migrants in a broad social framework that includes family dynamics, as well as in a temporal perspective that stretches beyond the initial moment of a failed departure.

#### **Keywords:**

Migration brokers, illegality, smuggling, trafficking, irregular migration, migration risk, deception, trickery, credibility, trust, moral economy, Cameroon

## **Why aspiring migrants trust migration brokers:**

### **The moral economy of departure in Anglophone Cameroon<sup>1</sup>**

Migration brokers are commonly thought of as playing either a positive or a negative role for people's aspirations for geographical and social mobility. A growing body of literature in the social sciences and humanities recognises the importance of mediation for migration trajectories (Baird forthcoming; Xiang 2007; McKeown 2008; Lindquist, Sanchez 2014, Spener 2009, Xiang and Yeoh 2012). These studies are beginning to analyse how relations between brokers and migrants are articulated in different contexts by geographically and culturally specific norms. Most research dedicated to migration brokerage, however, frame brokers as traffickers or smugglers (Aronowitz 2009, Chin 1999, Finkenauer 2001, Kyle and Liang 2001, Zheng 2010, Koser 1997, Doomernik 2012, Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012, Salt and Stein 1997, Van den Anker and Doomernik 2006). Qualifying migration brokers through such legal categories risks foreclosing our understanding of migration brokerage by unwittingly importing a functionalist, as well as a state perspective into the analysis (Scott 1998).

States have a vested interest in portraying migration brokers as criminal and immoral as this allows them to deflect from their own responsibilities in creating structural conditions for the exploitation of migrant labour (Anderson 2012). Scholars working on exploitative forms of labour migration have illuminated structural, including legal, sources of vulnerabilities for migrants in countries of arrival (Anker and Liempt 2012). This body of literature has overlooked to a large extent the cultural dynamics that tie together brokers and migrants from their shared countries of departure. Anthropologists and geographers have studied the cultural and social dynamics in which aspiring migrants seek to migrate (Graw and Schielke 2012, Ndjio 2009, Mazzucato 2011). This

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express in this place my thankfulness for the very insightful and dedicated comments from the two anonymous reviewers, the editors of this themed issue, the editors of the journal, as well as from Joost Beuving and Peter Geschiere.

body of literature provides important insights into values and norms of aspiring migrants and their families, but has largely neglected the infrastructure of migration, i.e. authorities that deny or give access to geographical mobility (Xiang 2013: 15). While a group of Africanists has done very illuminating work on self-made men as emerging local authorities who create wealth amongst others through trans-continental mobility (Beuving 2013, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, Ndjio 2008), this body of scholarship has not related itself to academic debates on socio-legal processes that are in other disciplines framed as smuggling, trafficking or broadly as transnational crime.

This article seeks to fill the gap between these different bodies of literature by offering empirical analysis of how migration facilitation processes work on the ground and relate to the vulnerability of migrants and non-migrants at large. In the article, I argue that migration brokers cannot exclusively be understood as actors that are instrumental in making migration happen. To grasp why aspiring migrations continue to entrust money with migration brokers, it is imperative to also consider migration brokers' symbolic capital. The paper therefore looks at the cultural universe of migration in Cameroon. It deciphers the moralities within a context of departure that shape relations between migration brokers, aspiring migrants and family members – both at the point where clients hand over money and at points of failure.

Rather than evaluating the credibility of brokers in terms of the supposed 'legal' or 'illegal' nature of their work, the article elaborates on how aspiring migrants distinguish between dokimen, feymen and big men. Dokimen are migration brokers who offer travel documents for travel purposes without further guarantees about success or other follow-up services. Feymen are tricksters who use the scarcity of legal avenues for international travel to swindle and make money. Big men are public figure heads who use their social networks to act as patrons for others who are less well placed. The economy of trust for migration and international travel is discussed through these three vernacular categories.

The empirical material for this article comes out of a broader research project on the control and facilitation of emigration trajectories from Cameroon to wealthier countries in the ‘West’. Between 2007 and 2013, I conducted 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a small university town called Buea in Anglophone Cameroon. I observed how aspiring migrants and their family members engaged with migration brokers and consulate offices in their attempts to leave the country. The research covered a broad range of migration brokers offering very different kinds of services. Two of these brokers had offices and I was thus able to observe their work in their respective work spaces on an almost daily basis. I accompanied them on various trips and visits and have followed their trajectories for seven years now. All conversations and interactions for this research were in Pidgin. Wherever appropriate, I have endeavoured to share the wealth of these local ways of expression.

The article asks why aspiring migrants continue to trust migration brokers even in the case of prior failures and disappointments. After providing an overview of facilitation services and transcontinental migration in Anglophone Cameroon today, the article discusses three local categories - namely dokimen, feymen and bigmen – that have come to characterize norms and values that surround departure projects. In a first case study of a failed departure projects, the article then examines a range of hopes and fears that drive relations between brokers, migrants and their families. The second case study examines how aspiring migrants and their family members continue to relate to and seek compensation from brokers after a failed departure project. The article closes with a discussion of how migration brokerage relates to European migration management and aspirations for global membership (Ferguson 2006: 155- 175).

### ***Aspiring migrants and migration brokers in Anglophone Cameroon***

Since the early 1990s, migration aspirations in Anglophone Cameroon are wide spread, visible in public life (see for example the naming of restaurants and bars), and present in daily conversations and jokes. While different social classes have different means to access the

opportunity to study and work abroad, migration aspirations nevertheless touch young Cameroonians from wealthier, as well as poorer families from all walks of life and with varying levels of education. Both men and women succeed in getting the financial support from their families to try and migrate, yet, migration aspirations are strongest amongst young Cameroonians in their 20s who are not yet married and without children at their charge (Alpes 2012). In Anglophone Cameroon, migration aspirations are particularly strong as Anglophone Cameroonians are faced with even fewer business and employment opportunities as a linguistic minority than their Francophone co-nationals.

Migration aspirations have become an essential part of society in Cameroon in the wake of the economic crisis following the structural adjustment programmes of the International Monetary Fund and the devaluation of the country's currency, the CFA franc (Van de Walle 2001, Konings 1996b: 252, Monga 1995). The effects of this economic crisis are still tangible today: family homes that are unfinished, insufficient pensions, civil servants who take on extra jobs to make ends meet. Since the initial crisis, rates of unemployment have been low, the informal sector large, university employees have needed contacts to be able to find paid employment, and apprentices are often forced to work for many years without pay. A sense of crisis has endured for almost 25 years and firmly established itself into people's livelihood strategies. In a routinized state of crisis (Mbembe & Roitman 1995; Johnson-Hanks 2005), coping has become a new way of life. In large parts of West Africa, people experience a void of meaningful citizenship, which in turn has fed into strong desires for the global (Piot 2010). Migration attempts are an important venue through which these desires take shape.

While local perceptions of migration vary regionally and take shape in relation to both national and global power dynamics (Pelican 2012), physical mobility has historically been very tied in Anglophone Cameroon with social mobility. Consequently, many aspiring migrants give large amounts of money to migration brokers in the hope of being able to leave the country. At times families even take out debt to finance emigration attempts and often the money invested

comes from important financial reserves for retirement or ill health. Only Cameroonians who belong to the elite of the country and have a strong network of international connections within their family or have already travelled abroad themselves will rely less on the help of migration brokers. Typically those in a privileged position because politically and economically well placed to be able to choose to stay and construct a life in Cameroon (Pelican 2012) are also able to migrate without a broker.

Since the late 1990s, Anglophone Cameroonians have invented a new term to describe the contemporary migration phenomenon of its region: “bushfalling”. Bushfalling is the act of going out to the wilderness (i.e. the bush) to hunt down a trophy (i.e. meat or money) and bring these back home (Nyamnjoh 2011). A person who has successfully travelled and hunted is called a bushfaller. Bushfallers are expected to return home with money for the survival of the family. By drawing on the images of hunting, Anglophone Cameroonians reveal how closely they associate travelling and migrating with risk taking, bravery and adventure.

Not incidentally, the same period has seen a tightening of border controls. So common are the stories of visa refusals that many aspiring migrants have given up on attempting to access geographical mobility through this route. The seeming impossibility for legal travel is experienced all the more violently as richer parts of the globe are imminently present in and through images, news and consumer goods. Not simply disconnected, but actively cut off from places where one’s labour would be remunerated more highly, young Cameroonians - like so many of their peers on the African continent – feel a sense of abjection (Ferguson 1999: 236). Migration policies seeking to avoid the exploitation of migrants by traffickers and smugglers have done little to alleviate people’s vulnerabilities and have instead heightened people’s dependency and need for such facilitators of mobility by adding new layers of control and suspicion at the border (Anderson 2012, Andrijasevic 2010).

Aspiring migrants try to overcome these hurdles to mobility by liaising with public figure heads that have important international connections that could facilitate their travel projects.

Migration brokerage services can vary from support with visa application forms in cyber cafes, to the issuing of invitation letters for conferences by NGOs, to actual all-inclusive travel packages offered by specialised offices. Travel opportunities can change very fast and the degrees to which mediated services are commercialized differ. The prices for travel programmes varied between 1.8 million CFA francs for China and Dubai (roughly 2,700 Euro) and 2.5 million CFA francs for Canada and Europe (roughly 3,800 Euro).

To be able to facilitate migration, brokers require a set of skills for the fabrication of travel documents, a set of connections abroad or with state actors for the mobilisation of documents, and/or cultural and social skills to be able to convince potential clients that they are able to deliver on their promises. As a line of business, migration brokerage offers the potential for high profits. Yet, brokers are not necessarily amongst the wealthiest in their places of origin. Migration as a line of business entails many risks and the two brokers whom I have followed in greatest depth have both repeatedly been obliged to close down (and then re-open) their offices on occasion.

While trust through ethnic networks can be crucial in individual relations, in practice, none of the individuals and offices I observed had a tendency to recruit more clients from their home communities. Anglophone migration brokers come from both the South and North West province. Only in exceptional cases did I hear about (but not personally meet) female migration brokers. While women can of course also become symbols of economic success (cf. Khor 2009), the symbolic capital that it requires to act as migration brokers makes it easier for men to be credible as brokers of global mobility. Regardless of gender, aspiring migrants and migration brokers are not 'other' to aspiring migrants, but rather 'allies' and 'helpers' in a quest for both geographic and social mobility. Often brokers had the expertise and the connections that they need for their work precisely because they have attempted emigration before for themselves or had managed to leave the country and had then been deported back.

In a context of imposed immobility (Carling 2002), any knowledge or experience of the outside world is a social currency that can be exploited as a resource. In this sense, deportation is



not necessarily a total failure (Alpes 2014). At least two of the brokers with whom I did research had experienced deportation prior or during their work as migration brokers. Because both brokers had other social, political and economic resources to rely on, they were able to capitalize even on failed departure and migration projects to establish themselves or enhance their work as facilitators of other people's migration projects.

### **Moral economy of departure: dokimen, feymen and big men**

Legal considerations hardly arise in discussion between brokers and aspiring migrants. During the entire fieldwork period, I only once heard a migrant ask about the nature of the visa he was going to receive. The broker's reply was that a "a visa was a visa". Relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers can thus not be understood through the lens of legal paradigms, but need to be analysed through the moralities that shape the economy of departure.

With the moral economy of departure, I refer to the production and circulation of values, emotions and norms as they are evoked by the event of departure. Originally, Thompson coined the notion of the moral economy to tease out both the "view of societal norms and obligations" and the "proper economic functions of several parties within the community" (1971: 79). Recently, however, the moral economy has been used as an analytical lens to elaborate less on notions of economic justice and exploitation (Scott 1977) and more on values and norms of a given group at a given moment (Fassin 2009: 1257; Fassin 2005). Following the work of Olivier de Sardan, this article seeks to elaborate on the moral economy of departure in Anglophone Cameroon by means of making visible "processes of legitimation from the actors' point of view" (1999: 25).

An inductive analysis based on indigenous categories can render visible this actors' point of view. When talking about migration facilitation services, emic categories can make visible a moral economy of legitimacy and illicitness that is connected, but distinctively different from the value judgments inherent in legal categories. In the moral worlds of policy makers, for example, the potential illegality of a migration facilitation service merges either with its illicitness or its potential

harmful effect on migrants. In a place of departure where legal means of travel are largely unattainable for great section of the population, however, migration facilitation services offer real avenues of hope for geographical mobility. Aspiring migrants relate the potential trickery of a broker with the institutionalised sabotage of their migration ambitions, notably by destination states that deny visas. As a consequence, aspiring migrants and their families do not necessarily distinguish harshly between their different failed travel attempts that did or did not involve a migration broker.

Rather than referring to migration brokers as smugglers, aspiring migrants in Anglophone Cameroon talk about “dokimen”, “feymen” and “big men”. Such emic classifications do not refer to separate social groups or different professional activities, but to different appreciations of the work of migration facilitation. One migration broker might be classified as a dokiman by some and as a feyman or big man by others. Evaluations of the work of migration brokers can depend amongst others on normative values about the legitimacy of mobility, understandings of law and social dynamics of (transnational) family life. Emic classifications are thus also indicative of the socio-cultural position of the one characterizing the work of migration brokers.

Migration brokers, aspiring migrants and family members articulate, perform and evaluate their relations through the use of the terms dokimen, feymen and big men. Each term indicates different types of expectations, hopes and fears. Issues of trust and trickery need to be evaluated with respect to the expectations that aspiring migrants had when they decided to trust a broker. As aspiring migrants expect different things from dokimen and big men, their cut-off point to formulate accusations of deceit will vary depending on whom they believe they had in front of themselves when they handed over money. I will discuss each category in turn.

Big men pose as powerful people with good connections. They usually dress elegantly and are equipped with multiple mobile phones, or endowed with other signs of wealth and status (Rowland 1994). The term ‘big man’ can be used for businessmen and politicians (Daloze 2002). Migration brokers that are big men successfully manage to act as patrons and function as social

elevators (Daloz 2002; 2005). Their legitimacy is connected to this dispersal of powers and potential bestowment of status. Aspiring migrants expect big men to have important connections through which international travel becomes possible. These connections can be with dokimen, as well as with both international and/or state institutions. One of the brokers of this study, for example, had a big photo of himself shaking hands with the Chinese Ambassador in his office. Another broker used to decorate his office with Cameroonian flags and some of his clients would call him 'Ambassador'.

It is the highly visible social status of big men that instills the trust of aspiring migrants. In the eve of a failed departure project, an aspiring migrant will only talk of trickery if he has reason to doubt either the quality of the connections of the broker or his willingness to mobilise them. In the former case, the aspiring migrant will ad-hoc evaluate that his migration broker was not a big man, but a mere dokimen. In the later case, the aspiring migrant will ad-hoc evaluate that his migration broker was a feyman.

Feymen are con artists and trick businessmen (Ndjio 2006; Malaquais 2001). They generate money through swindling and financial deception. Some feymen generate so much money that they can become local and national benefactors. Despite the often unlawful nature of their economic activities, feymen are respected as wealthy and powerful men. Visually, feymen are dressed in the exact same way as big men. In a context where deception and trickery play an important role for African economies (Bayart et al 1999:70), all new forms of wealth have come to be closely associated with feymenia (Ndjio 2006).

Feymen are migration brokers who by definition trick their clients and do not deliver what they promise. They might have connections or skills, but are not willing to put these at the disposal of their clients. Feymen typically disappear after a failed emigration attempt or cut of relations even before the actual departure project. Aspiring migrants will always fear that the broker they have chosen will turn out to be a feyman. If in the eve of a failed departure project a big man maintains

contact with his or her clients, he is not necessarily a fayman, but maybe a mere dokiman.

Classifications of migration brokers as feymen are mostly only post-hoc evaluation.

Dokimen are craftsmen who imitate and manufacture documents. They mostly offer support with administrative processes in the national context. Dokimen dress inconspicuously and typically do not set up offices, but rather advertise their services on posters outside universities and on fliers in cybercafés. They operate individually and with a much smaller profit margin. Dokimen rarely specialize in international travel. Instead, they mostly offer documents that can facilitate access to a visa or a residence permit, such as for example birth certificates, marriage certificates, school leaving certificates, banking statements or entry or exit stamps in passports. Some dokimen also directly manipulate and produce travel documents, such as passports, visas or residence permits. Dokimen can sell these travel documents to both aspiring migrants, as well as to big men who try to make aspiring migrants travel.

An aspiring migrant will trust a dokiman because of his skills and will only expect in return a document that will hopefully stand up to the scrutiny of the respective control agent in consulates or at the airport. In the event of a failed departure project, aspiring migrants will not evaluate that their dokiman has duped or tricked them. They will rather come to the conclusion that they were either unlucky or the technical skills and knowhow of the dokiman not good enough. When entrusting money with a dokiman, aspiring migrants fear controls by state agents much more than the potential for deceit on behalf of their chosen broker.

Emic framings of migration brokers as dokimen, feymen or big men are not necessarily stable over time. After a failed or successful departure project, aspiring migrants will know whether their chosen big man was a true man of powerful connections, a mere manipulator of travel documents or a person seeking only his own personal wealth. In what follows, the article will examine in greater depth how issues of trust and trickery play themselves out in family networks over time.

### ***Involuntary return: fears of selfishness and jealousy***

After five prior failures to migrate, Pamella's parents took up contact with the migration broker Mr. James and gave him an initial amount of 500.000 CFA (760 Euro) in 2008. During this period, Mr. James offered travel programmes to Dubai, Europe and South Africa. Although he was later pursued in court for abuse of trust, his prison sentence did not stop him from being credible as a migration broker after his release. At our last interaction in 2014, he had just opened up a new migration broker office – this time round in Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon.

After further delays, Pamella's parents proceeded – despite their daughter's repeated warnings - to hand over a further two million CFA to Mr. James (3.000 Euro). Pamella's parents are originally from the North West Province and had migrated to work in the Ndu Tea Estate in the North West Province and later for a tea estate in the South West Province. The plantation company was privatised in 2002 and Pamella's parents were both made redundant in 2006. Nevertheless, they continued to have important financial responsibilities for Pamela's younger brothers, sisters and cousins. Due to the death of Pamella's two maternal aunts, her parents were in charge of the education of nine children in total.

Pamella's parents ended up putting great trust in the migration broker Mr. James not despite, but *because* of the financial burden for the education of her younger siblings and cousins. At the village level, Mamie Pamella was an educated woman.<sup>2</sup> If not for bushfalling, she believed that there was no hope for the younger children to be able to go to university. 'Look at the children', Mamie Pamella told me, 'Nobody is really in a position to 'survive' (i.e. to support) the others.' She her eldest and most educated daughter to begin to take charge of the remaining dependents. Despite her undergraduate degree in law, Pamella was not able to do so while being in Cameroon. When I met her, she had been working for years without pay as an intern in a law firm. The rent of her room was paid for by a married man whom she was dating.

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<sup>2</sup> In Cameroon, mothers are often named after their children. Hence, Mamie Pamella is a popular way of referring to Pamella's mother.

Pamella's father furthermore feared that his wife and daughters would be disinherited at his death and left without any means at their disposal. Upon death, customary law assigns belongings to the eldest male child in the family.<sup>3</sup> As Pamella's father considered his eldest son irresponsible, he had registered his two stores under the name of his wife and his eldest daughter. Nonetheless, he feared that his legal testimony would not be respected by his male siblings. If Pamella could become a migrant, however, she would be able to take care of her mother, sisters and cousins regardless.

After a series of further delays, Pamella finally left the country at the end of the year 2008, but when a week later I prepared to visit her parents, I heard surprising news. Pamella had come back. A few weeks after her involuntary return Pamella told me what has happened. Her journey never went beyond Kiev airport to her imagined final destination in Norway. The flight ticket, that a contact person of Mr. James had booked, brought Pamella and another client straight into the military airport of Kiev. Controls here were tighter. Together with her travel companion, Pamella was immediately sent back to Cameroon.

Although deeply disappointed with Pamella's involuntary return, her parents continued to consider Mr. James a big man and not a feyman. In Cameroon, a broker can fail, but maintain his reputation as big man if he has succeeded in sending out others in the past and if his intention to do the same again is not at stake. When Pamella's father went to the office, Mr. James said he wanted to pay back parts of the money, but did not have it at his disposal. Mr. James also proved that he was not selfish by providing shelter to Pamella who needed to recover from the shock of her involuntary return. When Pamella left his house to see her parents he gave her 60,000 CFA francs (roughly 100 Euro) for transport. He thus remained the 'big man' who handed out money to people around him.

When digesting her daughter's failed migration attempt, Pamella's mother compared Mr. James's office to a camera. Before you develop the film, you cannot see the photos on the film. The

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<sup>3</sup> For further details on financial dynamics within family networks in the North West Province, see Endeley (2001: 38).

horizon of expectation vis-à-vis a migration broker always includes the possibility of failure.

Migration attempts are always risky and their outcomes uncertain. The only way of being able to migrate is to take risks – including by giving money to a migration broker who has been able to send others abroad in the past.

While the level of expertise, skills and intentions of a migration broker is important, the respective success or failure of a travel attempt also depends on secrecy. Pamela and her parents, for example, kept both her departure and involuntary return secret. Aspiring migrants who attract jealousy can all too easily become the objects of witchcraft attacks that lead to the faltering of migration attempts (Alpes 2012). Aspiring migrants thus keep their departure projects secret to avoid the jealousy of friends and neighbours. In this way, the success cases of migration brokers are more visible than their failures. And even if failures become visible, aspiring migrants will often put the blame for these failures on jealous family members or friends, rather than on their respective migration broker.

Although Pamela had been skeptical about the powers of Mr. James, the need for secrecy curtailed her scope to be more active in preparing her departure and in trying to claim back money from Mr. James after her involuntary return. She had little bargaining power with her parents who – in the words of Pamela – had been “simple labourers” and did not trust that the outside world could be attainable to their daughter without the mediation of a broker. When her parents insisted on maintaining their payments with Mr. James, they were investing in her to be able to take care of the remaining family. Resistance on her part could have been understood as selfishness. Mr. James’s performance as a ‘big man’ and his emphasis on his ‘international connections’ outweighed Pamela’s much higher level of education.

After her return, Pamela was contemptuous of Mr. James and accused him of being a mere dokiman. The opening that he had found was not based on real fledge or on genuinely powerful

connections. He merely offered her an Italian residence permit.<sup>4</sup> Although Pamela was in distress, she did not blame her migration broker. She exclaimed: ‘I blame Biya’, i.e. the Cameroonian president. For one thing, Pamela considered conditions in Cameroon to be unbearable. Her real suffering stemmed not from the money she and her parents had lost in this failed migration project, but in her impossibility to make a living in Cameroon. Pamela saw her state of destitution as resulting not predominantly from her broker, but rather from the overall economic and political situation of her country of origin.

For another thing, Pamela blamed Biya by means of pointing out that she had also been the victim of state regimes of migration control. A substantial part of the money Pamela had lost on this failed migration project had gone to Cameroonian police officers and airline company staff. On her way out of Cameroon, Pamela had come under suspicion because of her Italian residence permit for Italy she was carrying. She had needed to pay 300 Euros to Cameroonian state officials at the airport to be allowed to get onto the plane to Ukraine. On her involuntary return flight from Kiev, Pamela was wary of police accusations of using fake identity documents. Migration and development programmes have over the years heavily invested into the development of civil registry reforms. For policemen at the airport, combatting fraud has become an important issue. As the Ukrainian police had entrusted Pamela’s travel documents to the airline staff, she had to negotiate to get them back against a fee. Unlike others, Pamela was thus able to avoid imprisonment upon arrival at the airport.

The above case has illustrated that a migration broker’s potential failure needs to be understood in relation to local understandings of deceit and success. After Pamela’s involuntary return, her parents continued to consider Mr. James a big man and Pamela considered him a *dokimen*. Neither accused Mr. James of *feymania*, i.e. bad intentions and selfishness. Both

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<sup>4</sup> In Mr. James’ plan, Pamela was to use her Italian residence permit to travel from Ukraine to any place in Europe where she had a Cameroonian support network.



compared the failure of their migration broker to the failure of the Cameroonian state to provide more viable economic circumstances and immigration states to deliver long-term work visas.

The potential of deceit by migration brokers is mitigated by cultural beliefs and internal family dynamics. Migration failures can be attributed as much to the failure of an individual broker as to the jealousy and witchcraft of neighbors and friends. And aspiring migrants are as much under pressure to avoid being seen as selfish as migration brokers. Finally, migration brokers offer – despite inherent risks – escape routes from structural forms of theft and injustice.

### ***Delayed departure: debt transfers between family members***

If continued interactions between aspiring migrants, family members and facilitators help to defer judgments about deceit, we need to understand better how these relationships are recalibrated within a broader social context so that they can indeed be sustained. My informant Victoria was from the South West Province and had undergone one year of accountancy training at university. Her level of education was the highest in her family and it was thus clear that she was destined to become a migrant. Victoria knew the migration broker Mr. Walter because he was the husband of a fellow university student, as well as a member of the same Church. Victoria lobbied her (paternal) uncle who agreed to finance her bushfelling project. As a cocoa farmer, he was able to finance the project and in 2004, he handed over 1.3 million CFA francs to Mr. Walter.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, Victoria was never able to go because – as Mr. Walter explained – he had had to spend her money on “another purpose”. Victoria struggled in vain to get her money back. Victoria’s paternal uncle was angry with Victoria because he suspected her of having ‘eaten the money’ herself (Bayart 2009) - that is of having used the money for her own personal advantage instead of travelling to earn money for the benefit of her family in Cameroon. Subsequently, Victoria fell

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<sup>5</sup> Victoria’s paternal uncle was a North Westerner who came down to make his fortune with cocoa farming in the South West Province. Victoria herself was born in the South West Province. As her parents were dead, her uncle was in charge of her. Since about 2000, cocoa sells at relatively good rates and those farmers do, according to Cameroonian standards, quite well. A plantation like the one Victoria’s uncle owns can generate in one year almost 3,000,000 CFA francs (4.500 Euro).

severely ill for eight months. Knowing that her uncle did not trust her on how she had used his money, Victoria was convinced that her illness was the consequence of a witchcraft spell that her uncle had put on her.

After her recovery, Victoria gave up on migration and married a North Westerner and gave birth. After her marriage, Victoria's husband took it upon himself to pay back the debt to her uncle. Four years after the initial failure to leave the country, her husband had managed to pay back half, i.e. 650.000 CFA. As times became financially more difficult, however, he asked Victoria in 2008 to return to Mr. Walter to try and retrieve the money. Over time, Victoria had grown very sceptic of Mr. Walter's doings, yet, fundamentally still considered him not as a feyman, but as a businessman in his own trade. When they met again in his office, Mr. Walter offered in a conciliatory voice that, if Victoria could bring him another client, he would be able to deduct money from that fee to reimburse her. Victoria was not satisfied with this offer as she did not initially know anybody who wanted to go out. A few weeks later, it was decided that her younger brother would go out and travel. Matthias only had his A-level degree, but as her only brother was 'chop chair', i.e. the successor and future head of family. In the case of the death of the current head of family, he would have responsibilities within the family and if he were to become a bushfaller, this would be beneficial for the entire family.

When Victoria and her brother went to announce this news to Mr. Walter, he promised 'to perform'. He prided himself to be powerful and within the same breath pointed to the photo of himself and the Chinese Ambassador in the room. 'The Ambassador recognizes us.' Mr. Walter offered stories on salary levels in China and potential profit margins and went on to talk a few words of Chinese. 'My own level end[s] for visa and ticket. But since we know [each other]... I will help you with everything.' Victoria was worried how her brother would cope in China, but Mr. Walter responded that he could not 'perform' in his place. 'I can only give you a channel to go. You have to be smart.' The way Mr. Walter put matters, any failure would be Matthias's responsibility and not the consequence of the kind of visa he had, the job market there and his own qualifications

and connections. Mr. Walter managed affairs in such a way that many of his services were given out of kindness, but not as part of the actual agreement with his clients.

When Victoria wanted to leave the office, Mr. Walter asked her to ‘perform’. Victoria did not understand, yet, Matthias did. He took out 500,000 CFA francs and handed it over to his elder sister. His uncle had given him the money. Victoria was not aware that Matthias had this money on him, nor that her uncle had already seen Mr. Walter. After the first failure in 2004, the uncle might have wanted to secure the transaction by interacting directly with the broker. The potential deceit of migration brokers is often also intermingled with the potential deceit by family members who might seek to prevent the departure or success of other family members or who deliberately play to upkeep the image of a successful bushfaller even in the face of hardship in countries of arrival.

Mr. Walter did his calculations. He introduced a 25 percent reduction of the initial payment of 1.3 million CFA francs three years ago because he argued that ‘Victoria had not shown up for travel.’ There was little space for Victoria to challenge this reduction which boiled down to a loss of money of 325,000 CFA francs (500 Euro). As it were, Matthias still needed 800,000 CFA francs (1,000 Euro) to complete the payment for the new travel attempt. This renewed payment allowed Mr. Walter to break even, i.e. to get a visa and a flight ticket for Matthias without neither making a profit nor a loss. From Victoria’s perspective, the transaction meant that her husband no longer needed to pay back his debt to her uncle. Instead, as it was not the responsibility of an in-law to pay for Matthias’ departure, the uncle now needed to reimburse Victoria’s husband for the money he had already paid back.

Victoria held the bills Matthias had given her and hesitated: ‘Money that I will give you the second time?’ When Mr. Walter kept stressing how very fast Matthias could be leaving, she ended up handing over the money. Immediately afterwards, Mr. Walter began calling Matthias ‘boss’. Having now officially signed up for bushfalling, he advanced to the status of a real ‘man’. Having overcome her fears, Victoria complimented Mr. Walter for speaking with confidence. As she set off to leave, she asked him to dash her money. He stated that he never really carried money on himself

because if he did, he would immediately spend it. Just to fuel the car would cost him 50,000 CFA francs, he boasted. Victoria was impressed and again compliments him for being rich and on a different level. Obviously pleased, Mr. Walter laughed and handed two 2,000 CFA franc notes to Victoria. Victoria thanked him. Symbolically, Victoria and Mr. Walter had turned the pages of past disputes. By ‘dashing’ her a monetary gift of 4,000 CFA francs, Mr. Walter symbolically accepted his role of protector and patron. His symbolic gift proved his generosity and goodwill (Daloze 2005: 168). Mr. Walter is a big and powerful man who will do his best to look after his dependents – of which Victoria’s family has once again become one.

In an analysis of social dynamics of migration facilitation services, aspiring migrants and migration brokers cannot antagonistically be opposed to each other. Just before Matthias’ departure for China, it turned out that the uncle was reluctant to give Matthias pocket money for his first weeks in China. Mr. Walter was there to mediate relations between Matthias and his uncle. He printed a statement with an institutional letter head, specifying that one million CFA francs were necessary for Matthias’s accommodation and bills upon arrival in China. With this paper in hand, Matthias was able to win over his uncle’s trust.

Mr. Walter on his end proceeded to obtain a Chinese visa for Matthias and the uncle completed all payments on the day of his departure at the airport of Douala. Upon arrival in China, Matthias never received any of the help and support Mr. Walter had so very generously promised. This was, however, largely beyond vision to others in Cameroon. For most, Matthias had gone out and was a bushfaller now. Mr. Walter had proven his power. It was now up to Matthias to also ‘perform’ and earn money.

Evaluating the limits of trust between aspiring migrants and migration brokers according to the expectations and motivations of aspiring migrants themselves allows us to see beyond formalistically understood ‘rights’ and ‘obligations’ of an economic business agreement. Aspiring migrants trust migration brokers even in the face of failed departure projects partly because these setbacks can be temporary and partly because both failure and success are never individual, but

always collective. While Mr. Walter first failed Victoria, he did not turn out to be a feyman as he recognised past payments. By sending her brother out, he proved his status as a big man as he was able to transform Victoria's family into a bushfaller family.

Prospective migrants, their family networks and facilitators are obliged to piece together on-going relationships in a context where migration projects are characterized by fragmented and contradictory knowledge, infused with many critical aspirations, and subject to arbitrary occurrences and elements of chance. These relations are only partially subjected to familiar tropes of trust and certainty. Instead, fears of jealousy and selfishness reign over all interactions, including those between family members.

## ***Conclusion***

The discourse of trafficking and smuggling blames migration brokers for the vulnerability and exploitation of migrants. The policy discourse that follows from the Palermo Protocol simplistically associates brokerage with illegality and illegitimacy. Consequently, giving money to migration brokers comes to be seen as naïve and risky. This article has sought to overcome state-driven polarizations between naïve migrants and criminal brokers by reconstituting the social field of migration brokerage through the terms of aspiring migrants themselves. By drawing on the vernacular categories of feymen, big men and dokimen, the article has explored relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers from the perspective of people in a place of departure.

Talking of migration brokers as either smugglers or traffickers also overshadows economic, legal and social sources of migrant aspirations and vulnerability. As legally contested yet culturally grounded actors, migration brokers operate in sites of (attempted) government intervention. Along with other broker figures, such as traders, (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000), voleurs imprenables (Roitman 2005), démarcheurs (Beuving 2013) and feymen (Ndjio 2006), migration brokers fulfill the role of gatekeepers in facilitating access to a desired object or objective, such as

mobility, money, goods or citizenship. As such, migration brokers mediate Africa's extraversion (Bayart 2000) – standing and shaping the crossroads of local and global dynamics.

In the Cameroonian moral economy of migration, the success of migration trajectories plays a limited role for the credibility of migration brokers. Clients continue to do business with brokers, even though they are not always successful in making migration trajectories happen. This phenomenon can only be understood if we appreciate the moralities and ethics through which aspiring migrants and their family come to evaluate risks and benefits. Aspiring migrants entrust money with migration brokers because they are also dealers of hopes for global belonging (Ferguson 2006: 174-175). Hopes are immaterial and thus appearances of migration brokers as big men with global connections can in part suffice to realize their role as helpers and facilitators of access to the international arena. Further restrictiveness in Europe's management of migration will only increase the worth and value of international connection and geographical mobility and thus the demand for big men to act as migration brokers.

Aspiring migrants also entrust money with migration brokers because they evaluate risks from the vantage point of societies in emigration countries. In the face of economic hardship and in the absence of a functioning social security system, migration itself can serve as a source of social protection. Given that migration without the help of a broker is doomed for failure for great parts of the population, the source of migration failure is not necessarily located with the broker, but considered to be an inherent part of any travel project. Not being able to trust state actors has rendered being duped by a feyman and committing fraud with the help of a dokiman into acceptable risks for aspiring migrants.

Against the backdrop of reductive framings of aspiring migrants as naïve and migration brokers as potentially abusive, this article has demonstrated how relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers are embedded in broad social networks that unfold over time periods that extend beyond one-off departure attempts. Consequently, the key question is no longer why aspiring migrants trust migration brokers, but why they have so few other means to realize

aspirations for global citizenship. And yet, it is not enough to arrive at the conclusion that migration brokers are to a large extent the social effects of European migration management. States have stakes in framing aspiring migrants as naïve and vulnerable. The criminalisation of migration brokers legitimises the state's control over movement and thus feeds into the continuous construction of its monopoly over the legitimate means of movement (Torpey 1997). A study of migration facilitation services will in the future require more socio-legal analysis of how states set up both the context and the terms of the debate on migration brokers.

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